CHAPTER V

If the early Yeats committed himself to the Aesthetic conception of art, the later Yeats may be said to have proved that life could be made into art. The manner in which the concrete facts of life provided grist to his Romantic mill may allow scope for such an interpretation. The definition of Romantic poetry as poetry of experience, which offers a contrast to the poetry of meaning, may lend itself to such a view, though the emphasis of the poetry of experience is bound to be on the inner experience of the poet.¹ But the way Yeats looked at the realities of life and assimilated them into his poetry adds a new dimension to that definition. It is perhaps his seeming allegiance to the realities of life that made certain distinguished critics misconstrue his poetic affiliation. Yeats's conception of reality, as we have noted earlier, had something singular about it. It may account for the static quality found in his poetry by L.C. Knights.² Knights has rightly traced it to the adoption of certain fixed attitudes in the face of experience. Having

identified the main constituent of Yeats's reality. Arthur Misener adds how Yeats insisted, in the teeth of evidence, that things are as the mind desires them. The comment implies that the Yeatsian approach to realities was in itself Romantic.

In his earnest bid to bring poetry close to life, Yeats certainly helped to bridge the gap between the actual and the ideal. George Bornstein has shown us how the Shelleyan Intellectual Vision of his early phase got replaced by an antinomial vision of paired opposites. He says:

Yeats no longer wanted to ascend to the Intellectual with the skylark, but to immerse himself in just that human world, the lusts of the market-place, which the skylark forsakes.

In other words, the Yeatsian bid was to invigorate poetry by bringing it down to earth. Yet the transformation thus brought about in his poetry, involving the actual and the ideal, was perhaps a little more complex. For, the actual in Yeats, as we saw it, had some aspects of the ideal about it. We may observe that the Yeatsian brand of realism was Romanticism in a new garb. Romanticism in his hands may be said to have absorbed certain aspects of realism without yielding up its intrinsic traits. His visionary absorption was perhaps both

a cause and a symptom of his weak grasp of realities. He was indeed "a too literal realist of imagination" (as observed by R.P. Blackmur, quoting a remark made by Yeats himself on William Blake), even more than Blake. Blake was certainly not as blind to material aspects. Blake's view that there was no dualism between spirit and nature apparently meant more than what Yeats chose to construe out of it. The hostility between Yeats and the everyday-world is borne out by his tragic view of life. His vision of Evil — "the conception of the world as a continual conflict", as Harold Bloom calls it, must have promoted that hostility.

Arthur Misener observes how, unlike Yeats, romantic poet like Shakespeare "could accept completely the life which submits to practical necessity, however intensely conscious he was of life's conflict with the life of the imagination," He appears to blame it on the solipsistic tendencies of Yeats, when he says:

... these early romantics had not yet completely destroyed in them their ability to believe that something beside their own imaginations had made the universe, nor were they so hard-pressed by the complete unwillingness of the scientific thought of their day to lend itself to their purposes. It may, even, indeed be that they were somewhat better-advised than Yeats of the difficulties of solipsism.  

8. Ibid., p.135.
Arthur Misener has made this observation while commenting on Yeats's over-assertive pretensions to mysticism. The bumptiousness in Yeats seems to form part of his wonted poses and gestures. The pride attributed to him by critics like P.R. Leavis and B.L. Reid seems to spring from a similar source. The 'inner coldness' found in Yeats by D.S. Savage may cause us most. Savage has considered his 'impossible' love and belated marriage to be symptomatic of that coldness. While one could certainly find Yeats guilty of quite a few misjudgements, the critic sounds rather unfair when he suggests that Yeats lacked warmth of feeling. Yeats, as we understand him, was always a warm-blooded person. Stephen Spender calls his humanity "his greatest virtue". Yeats's warm regard for his friends testifies to this. The ecstatic emotions aroused in him by their portraits have found eloquent expression in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited":

Think where men's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends.

Elsewhere we hear him say:

A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear,

suggesting the poignant feelings of one seeking a sense of


13. Ibid., p.370.

fulfilment in human relationships. Such words could hardly
have come from an unfeeling heart. Indeed, we are apt to
misread him, when he says:

\[
\text{Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by! 15}
\]

Hardly any other epitaph would have had so much meaning packed
into it. It results from a heightened awareness on the part
of the poet. The cold eye in such a context might symbolize
art itself, if the tranquility referred to in Wordsworth's
definition of poetry could be identified with a state of cold-
ness. The perplexing variety of masks worn by Yeats could
also be regarded as a means of adopting a cold eye. But, as
it happens, the person addressed here is a horseman and not an
artist. Yeats's partiality for the aristocratic values and
mode of life has obviously influenced his choice of the metaphor.
Perhaps it also suggests his fancy for 'the high-horse-riding'
in the figurative sense of it. In such a context, the cold
eye could mean only the coldness deliberately assumed for a
heroic defiance of the tragedy of life and death. Yeats's
circumstances were propitious enough (he was indeed far from
happy with them) for the adoption of a cold eye. But we are
left wondering at the naivete that made him expect a young
soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen to assume an identical coldness.
We cannot afford to forget that Owen's poems were no test-tube
babies. Crediting Yeats with the perspective of the aged

15. Ibid., p.401.
prophet on the mountain "undisturbed by compassion, unmoved by the prospect of suffering", as Jon Stallworthy has done, can lead us nowhere, unless we are prone to take Yeats's pretensions more seriously than he himself did.16 His attitude towards Wilfred Owen was perhaps an instance of the curious brand of realism that he was capable of. We are reminded of Arthur Misener's comment on his way of seeing things. All the same, we may have to concede that in managing matters and men, including, no doubt, women too — he showed much practical wisdom at times.

Perhaps we should thank providence for not allowing Yeats a smooth sailing in his life. Indeed we are aware that Yeats could make memorable poetry out of any kind of experience that was given — or denied — to him. Yet he could hardly have realised his inner potential as well as he did, if he had no quarrel either with himself or with the world. The supreme belief in human potentialities evidenced in the context is the hallmark of the Yeatsian Romanticism.

The process of stripping English poetry of its "perdurable rhetoric", was initiated by Yeats in the early years of the twentieth century.17 While aiming at a classical accuracy,

precision, and hardness in his verse, he sought to make it passionate too, going a step ahead of T.E.Hulme. He realized how modern poetical literature had grown "monotonous in its structure and effeminate in its continual insistence on certain moments of strained lyricism." He tried to infuse it with the fresh blood of authentic emotions. He meant to make it sound like the utterance of a whole man - "blood, imagination and intellect running together". Moreover, having noticed how Wordsworth's syntax had "lacked momentum" compared with Byron's, and how the former "had sacrificed passion to propriety", he heeded the counsel of J.M. Synge and resolved to make poetry brutal before it could be human. His effort to evolve a passionate syntax while adopting a common idiom meant a march over the great Romantics. But with all his mastery over the poetic technique, passion was not a thing that could be made to order. Indeed his experiences - both personal and political - had been exceptionally fruitful that way. But his solipsistic leanings apparently posed him formidable problems in his endeavour to develop a Keatsian capability to harness instant experiences for poetic purposes with an air of detachment. It was quite some time before he could gain the inner stability and calm - 'tranquillity', as Wordsworth called it - to give poetic expression to newly

18. Quoted in Pinto, P, 90.
19. Quoted in Bornstein, George, TR., p.46.
acquired emotions. His belated marriage would seem to have gone a long way towards bringing that tranquillity. And it was perhaps natural that the exquisite piece of art that he made a few months before his marriage - "The Wild Swans at Coole" - appeared to be his swan-song. Middleton Murry found it deficient in the "passionate apprehension" of experiences.20

The poem begins with the description of a placid landscape, perhaps the best of its kind in Yeats's poetry.

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

It is autumn and the season seems to symbolize the stage of the poet's own life. Yet the landscape has not been painted arbitrarily. It yields no hint of any attempt at distorting facts to suit the emotional needs of the poet. The atmosphere is serene. But we are aware that the poet was in an extremely depressed state of mind, when the poem was composed. Maud Gonne had once again rejected his proposal. And her adopted daughter Isuelt Gonne had also turned a cold shoulder on him. He had no ray of hope in sight. He could contrive joy and peace only artistically. What we have here may be proof of

a heroic bid in that direction. The swans whose hearts, much like his own, "do not grow old" serve him as an ideal symbol in the context.

The poem is refreshingly free of false sentiments. The accuracy and precision in the description of the landscape perhaps serves to effect a suspension of disbelief. The mention of the exact number of swans reminds us of the nine beanrows of his Innisfree. The sense of depression implicit here is held in leash through an impeccable intellectual control. There is as much ease and grace in the wording of the poem as in the movement of the swans.

Nature appears wholly unconcerned about human predica­ments. We find no hint here of the Wordsworthian belief in a special relationship between man and nature. The attitude of the poet towards nature is in tune with the mood of the century. He does not, however, consider nature purposively dangerous as certain later writers of the century have done. Robert Langbaum has called that tendency a pathetic fallacy. It is obviously of a negative type. Langbaum also says:

... to feel in nature an unalterably alien, even unfeeling existence is to carry empathy several steps farther than did the nineteenth century poets...

22. Ibid., p. 44.
24. Ibid., p. 104.
In the light of this view we may have to credit Yeats with an unusual degree of empathy. But it is doubtful whether Yeats deserves such a compliment. One would think that Yeats's attitude to nature was far from empathetic. It was even antipathetic. The Keatsian naturalistic humanism meant little to him. His treatment of swans here may be considered typical. He does not seem to evince any interest in them as living beings. He makes them appear no better than immortal pieces of art like the Grecian Urn. It is interesting to note how Keats's sympathetic imagination breathes life into the lifeless presences on the Urn. But Yeats goes the other way round. His interest in the swans seems to spring primarily from their symbolic value.

It is, however, to the credit of Yeats that the symbolic significance of the poem has not obscured its surface-meaning, as it does elsewhere in his poetry.

It is strange indeed that Yeats should love so much to cling to a world with which he was always at odds. In fact, he needed all his capacity to assume joy in order to keep his spirits in tact. Owing to the absence of a stabilising religious faith, he had to fend for himself in his hours of crises. "Lapis Lasuli" represents a heroic effort in that regard.

It was not old age alone that Yeats had to tackle in his later life. The whole weather in the free Irish Republic
had turned foul for him, thanks to his odd preferences in politics. His deep-rooted aversion for the middle-class Philistinism appears to have been generated by the controversies of his early life. His lack of humanistic concern, surely, did not embrace the other segments of society. Lines such as:

Why should I seek for love or study it?  
It is of God and passes human wit.  
I study hatred with diligence,  
For that's a passion in my own control.

could not have come from a misanthropist. The triumph of the middle-class aroused bitter feelings in him.

Nature might have served Yeats as a source of solace in such contexts, had he cared for it enough. But even as he had trained himself to cast a cold eye on it, Nature responded to him with a matching indifference and allowed him no sense of fulfilment of the Keatsian sort. And he had perforce to turn to art. The aimless, senseless joy of a fool was all that he could bargain for. He went all out in pursuit of it. The poems of his last phase contain ample proof of that sad, mad quest. "Lapis Lazuli" is among them.

The opening stanzas of the poem gives vent to Yeats's maddening sense of fury and frustration.

I have heard that hysterical women say  
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,  
Of poets that are always gay,  
For everybody knows or else should know  
That if nothing drastic is done  
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,  
Pitch like King Billy bomb-bally in  
Until the town lie beaten flat.

26. Ibid., p.338.
The words here sound sinister. The poet seems to warn the
world in a cold, vehement tone that its doom was imminent, if
his counsel was not heeded. His remark that those hysterical
women who neglect music, painting and poetry for taking to
polities will bring about the destruction of everything seems
to amount to an open onslaught, strangely enough, on the idol
he worshipped for the best part of his life. It may be proof
enough of his life-long passions degenerating into a mad fury
in the last lap of his life.

The rest of the poem sings the praise of the gay arts
which the hysterical women have been scorning. The fury to
which Yeats has yielded himself up, seems productive of a
tragic joy. He identifies it with the ecstasy felt by the
great characters of tragedies. He observes that an artist,
if he is worth anything is gay even as his entire life’s work
is reduced to nothing. For, he knows that the things destroyed
are built again.

After a lengthy preface that contains a lyrical state-
ment of some of his strong private persuasions, Yeats seeks
to put them in a dramatic form. The Lapis Lasuli presented
to him by someone helps in that effort. It is a carving in
stone. It has the figures of two China-men, a long-legged
bird and a servant carrying a musical instrument. The poet
meditates on that scene. "The plum or cherry branch" in the
carving attracts his attention. It is amusing to note how
little he cared for such things in nature. Their function now is obviously symbolic. The men in the carving are found climbing a hill. Yeats delights himself envisioning their further movements. They seem to be staring at a tragic scene. The poet imagines that one of them is requesting the other to sing sad songs. The poet is able to hear the music produced in response to the request. It brings a visionary moment:

One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay. 27

The sight of the glittering eyes of the men must have made Yeats's own eyes shine, as he is tempted to believe that they shared his attitude towards tragedy.

Yeats seems to have gone a step ahead of Keats when he imagines the further movement of the men in the carving. It suggests a dynamism, distinct from the static quality of the imagery of the Grecian Urn. Yeats appears to have abandoned the carving in the process "for a world constructed in pure imagination", 28 in a way typical of the Romantics. Yeats concludes the poem without allowing his visionary mood to wither away. Possibly, he is afraid of being thrown back on the rocks of realities. We are reminded of what he said in a letter:

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27. Ibid., p. 339.

I thought my problem was to face death with gaiety, now I have learned that it is to face life.²⁹ Perhaps we get a clue here to the working of his mind in the last phase of his life. The poet's keenly-felt desire to share his tragic joy with the men on the carving seems to have prompted him to identify himself with them. We have the Yeatsian brand of empathy here. To be sure, he would have had nothing to do with the Chinamen of the carving, had he felt that they were not capable of tragic gaiety. The Lawrencean gift of empathy with modes of life for which one felt little sympathy, referred to by D.J. Enright, was not his.³⁰

John Bayley has pointed out that a Mask of Violence was worn by Yeats in the present case, and it helped him to forget the terrors of the modern times.³¹ The extreme views packed into the poem and their exasperating expression are thus attributed to the mask. Yet in the mad fury of his last phase, probably, Yeats would not have bothered to disassociate himself from the mask.

Yeats's attitude towards the athletic joy found in the supreme moments of tragedy illustrated by "Lapis Lazuli" is considered part and parcel of his romanticism.³²


The function of the mask in the poetry of Yeats has been widely discussed. As mentioned by George Bornstein, he felt that the man bent on regaining a Unity of Being must imagine an ideal self opposite to his normal identity, an antitope, as "the complexities of the twentieth century made the conscious personality fragmented and incomplete." The utility of masks as depersonalising devices has been beyond doubt. A tormenting awareness of his inner inadequacies could also have prompted him to take to masks. His lack of imaginative sympathy, for instance, is perhaps sought to be compensated that way. His desire to understand mankind "in every possible circumstance and every conceivable situation" may have to be seen as a part of that bid. Thus he tried to put himself "in all the possible situations of life, from the most miserable to those that are so lofty." His belief in the educative value of the assumption of masks was much profound. He says:

Do you suppose for one moment that Shakespeare educated Hamlet and King Lear by telling them what he thought and believed? As I see it, Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare.... A dramatist can help his characters to educate him by thinking and studying everything that gives them the language they are grouping for through his hands and eyes, but the control must be theirs, and that is why the ancient philosophers thought a poet or dramatist Daimon-possessed.

33. Bornstein, George, Yeats & Shelley, p.133.
The reasoning that enabled Yeats to associate such a conscious effort on the part of a poet or dramatist with the Daimon has not been altogether convincing. In any case, he could hardly have trusted such a method for gaining "entire wisdom". To most of us, such a wisdom, commendable as it is, would seem to be a poor substitute to what comes out of a genuine compassion. Richard Ellmann has, however, given him superlative praise for the "nobility and largeness of mind" suggested by the bid and traced it to his "affirmative capability". The talents revealed, we may assume, is a negative capability distinctively Yeatsian.

Ellmann considers the Keatsian capability a lesser talent, as it seems to free the poet "from responsibility of intellectual search or understanding of experience". But the Keatsian ability is backed up by a sympathetic imagination, while the affirmative capability results from a hard-headed effort to cover up the vacuum created by the absence of it. The effort, doubtless, reveals the tremendous inner resources Yeats had in his command.

Yeats's extreme self-consciousness and sceptical cast of mind, which were perhaps more than Keatsian, along with his solipsistic leanings and lack of imaginative sympathy, must have undermined his capacity to identify himself with the objects of nature.

36. The Identity of Yeats, p.244.
Presumably, an emotional self-fulfilment was an important purpose served by the Yeatsian masks. We have been told what a timid and diffident thing Yeats was, in his early years. A look of toughness afforded by masks must naturally have impressed him. And possibly, the problems and challenges of his early life made him tough enough to think in terms of taking to masks. The failure of his fond hope of marrying Maud Gonne and her hard decision to favour a "vainglorious lout", who had nothing but a tough exterior to recommend him must have had a positive impact on Yeats. The masks might have made him feel happier through enabling him to see himself in an appropriate light, as indicated by L.C. Knights. They might also have provided a means of escaping "from the hot-faced bargainers and money-chargers". Above all, masks meant to Yeats "playing a game like that of a child, where one loses the infinite pain of self-realisation".

Yeats's curious attempts at assuming masks have obscured his personality from the view of certain critics. D.S. Savage, for instance, calls it a "mask". His subsequent assumption that Yeats's poetic development was essentially a betrayal of

37. vide Perkins David, IMP., p.582 and Bayley, John, RS., p.97.
38. WPYOP., p.205.
40. Yeats, W.B., Quoted in Knights, L.C., Critics on Yeats, p.18.
41. Yeats, W.B., vide Bayley, John, RS., p.
the personality-principle has drawn a caustic comment from Balachandra Rajan. It is surprising how he could turn a blind eye on the flood of disconcerting personal emotions, which, in their volcanic thrust, pierced through all masks in the concluding phase of Yeats's life.

What we witness in the poetry of Yeats is perhaps the progressive assertion of his personality over the tendency of his masks to obscure it. G.S. Fraser seems to mean as much when he says:

As Yeats's poetry matures, one of the things that happens is not so much that it becomes more 'personal', less of a 'mask', as that he gets more of his personality into it.

And it may well be that Yeats himself realized that "his dramatisations had been so often, in essence, self-dramatisations motivated with less dignity than he had supposed," as suggested by Christopher Gillie.

After all, Yeats himself could not have been unaware that there was something childish about his fancy for masks.

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45. Gillie, Christopher, Movements in English Literature, 1900-1940 (Cambridge University Press, 1975) p.156. Henceforth cited as Movements in English Literature.
The "phantasmagoria" he deliberately adopted was certainly unworthy of a great poet. For the greatest kind of art, as observed by A.G. Stock, "a man's whole self must be thrown recklessly into the theme with all his powers focused." Yeats would fain have done as much towards the end of his life at least, had he felt free enough to do so. But, as it happened, he was labouring under various constraints. They seem to have thrown him into a fit of fury that defied rational expression. He had neither time nor patience for recollecting that emotion in tranquillity. It had to be expressed in all its heat. His masks nearly dissolved in that heat. Yet, in a sense, they also helped him simultaneously to conceal and reveal the agitated state of his mind. Borrowing a metaphor from D.H. Lawrence, we may say that Yeats did indeed appear to put his hand on the mouth of the demon in him, but he certainly let the demon say his say.

Critics have been dumb founded by the sexuality and linguistic violence of the poems of Yeats's last phase. Some of them have perhaps been shocked into silence. Vivienne Koch, however, does not appreciate their sense of delicacy and embarrassment. The comments she has made on Norman Jeffares, for instance, have been astonishing in their lack of perspective. They suggest no awareness of the pioneering

48. The Tragic Phase, p.17.
contribution towards an understanding of Yeats made by Jeffares. Critics like F.R. Leavis find the poems of Yeats's last phase much too plain. But Vivienne Koch has expatiated on them with a rare relish. Assuming the air of one making a blinding revelation, she says that "sexual energy was the source, subject and theme" of Yeats's major poems of the last decade. She finds it easy enough to trace the upsurge in the sexuality of those poems to the Steinach operation underwent by Yeats. She does not realize that a fall in sexual vitality could also result in such poems: the weaker the flesh, the louder the song. David Perkins seems to mean as much when he says that Yeats "celebrated physical and sexual vitality, life in all its coarseness," against the failing body and the "approaching night". But F.R. Leavis appears to see deeper when he observes that "the ugliest and most disturbing expressions of inner discord and rebellion or despair" to be found in Yeats's œuvre mark his final phase. Graham Hough regards the harshness and violence of the Yeatsian language as the most disturbing feature of that phase. But Vivienne Koch has been significantly silent on that aspect. Presumably, she has not been able to grapple with it. Margaret Rudd has aptly called the poems of the

49. Leavis, F.R., Lectures in America, p.79.
50. The Tragic Phase, pp.20-21.
51. Perkins, David, HMP, p.598.
52. Leavis, F.R., Lectures in America, p.79.
phase 'shock-poems' and has considered their defiant manner more significant than their subject-matter. It would seem likely that Yeats, in his endeavour to give expression to his maddening sense of despair, fury and frustration, found in sexual themes, and a shocking vocabulary a striking, if inadequate, objective correlative. The hysterical quality and linguistic violence of the poems perhaps contribute to their lack of authenticity. Yet surely, sexuality in itself does not warrant such a vehemence in linguistic expression.

Such violent expressions are apt to impress us as full-blooded utterances of a man. Yet, as observed by Margaret Rudd, Yeats’s poems here are too extrovertly sexual to have much psychological significance. Yeats’s achievement in the case may, however, amount to a modulation towards a poetry of open process, as indicated by M.L. Rosenthal, albeit in a clumsy fashion.

The artistic achievement of the Unity of Being proves a formidable task, as it demands a rare degree of coordination between the poet’s inventive skill and imagination. In other words, it involves the attainment of an intellectual and emotional poise that is hard to come by.


55. Ibid., p.185.

The Byzantium poems would seem to represent a deliberate effort on the part of the poet to achieve such a unity through evolving a unifying symbol. The urge to make such an attempt was apparently intensified by the problems he confronted in his later life.

The first draft of "Sailing to Byzantium" laments:

All that men know or think they know, being young,
Cry that my tale is told, my story sung.57

Possibly, the allusion here is to men like Middleton Murry. They seem to have done him a good turn, as he roused himself with a vengeance to prove them wrong.

Yeats's longing to seek shelter in a world of art evidenced in "Sailing to Byzantium" has not involved the suppression of his instinctive feeling for the other world. It is refreshing to hear him speak in his own voice, setting aside all masks. In fact, we are told that the poet had not originally meant to speak in his own person. He had toyed with the idea of putting his words into the mouth of a medieval Irish poet. Such a move might well have appeared dishonest to many. But Yeats was prone to take his flair for wearing masks as a skill which had nothing to do with honesty or sincerity. Insincerity carried no pejorative overtone to him as indicated by John Bayley.58

"Sailing to Byzantium" is said to suggest a nostalgia

58. Bayley, John, p.96.
for the world of art. But its imagery betrays an irresistible feeling for the world which he seeks to leave behind, as observed by Norman Jeffares, among others. We are told that an old man in this world is no better than a tattered coat upon a stick, unless the spirit asserts itself in him. Having aligned himself with the body as long as he could, the poet now throws amorous glances at the spirit in a vain bid to compensate for the weakness of the flesh. The Neoplatonist belief that Matter occupied only the lowest rung of the ladder was certainly not his.

The song, we are told, has to be louder when the flesh grows weaker. What is heard in the last years of Yeats's life is such a loud singing, though not of the kind conceived of here. It is a case of inner instincts asserting themselves over the cold manoeuvrings of the intellect. Evidently, the momentary longing projected here was soon subdued.

The addressing of the sages apparently suggests a moment of awareness:

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifacts of eternity.59

The mention of God in the context is perhaps significant. It

might give credence to the view that Byzantium represented Yeats's idea of heaven. Yeats, however, has not thought it fit to count on God's help in his less intense moments. From that fact we may assume that his inability to attach himself to a formal religion was a problem of the conscious mind and his inward urges were pulling him towards an allegiance. In other words, we may observe that his inner personality craved for an abiding faith, while his character wilfully brushed aside that craving and engaged itself in inventing substitutes for a religious faith. When we take such a view, the absence of any reference to God in Yeats's later "Byzantium", may suggest the dominance of the conscious mind in its making.

The artifice of eternity sounds like a novel definition of art, as art is both artificial and eternal. The reference to the "perne in a gyre" relates the poem to Yeats's System. But it does not distract our attention seriously. Nor does it disturb the general significance of the poem. Even after gaining the shape of a golden bird and a place on a golden bough, the poet says that he will continue to sing of "what is past, or passing, or to come." It is odd indeed that he finds nothing better to sing about. The poet's interest is only in getting rid of the fleshly form, obviously because it has grown weak. No wonder that Sturge Moore found nothing superior in the golden bird. And the bird, we are told, is to sing only to the emperor, lords and ladies, and not to the lesser
It should be hard indeed to accept the view that the poem is an affirmation of the spirit over the life of the body. At best we may concede that it was perhaps meant to be so. But there is a yawning gap between intention and achievement here. Yet, we must value what is achieved in the context, as a faithful recording of the conflicting passions of the poet. The poem impresses us as an embodiment of Blake's proposition that eternity is in love with the productions of time, as remarked by Bala Chandran Rajan. The later "Rysantium" constitutes a painstaking effort on the part of the poet to correct that impression.

Harold Bloom finds the poem rather static. If he has meant by the comment that the poet's attitude revealed here suggests no progress, we are one with him. Yeats presumably was not capable of much progression in the direction signalled by the poem. The golden bird's lack of any convincing superiority is a sure symptom of that incapacity. As it is, the journey depicted in the poem seems to end where it began.

The deliberate bid on the part of Yeats to correct the impression created by "Sailing to Rysantium" has not helped to

61. WBKCP., pp. 280-81.
62. Yeats, p. 347.
mend matters enough. The new poem bears the stamp of a cold deliberation. The Yeatsian flair to make his poems appear products of a moment's thought (which approximated to the Keatsian talent in that regard), alluded to in "Adam's Curse" seems to have failed him in this instance. The laboured construction suggested here yields no trace of emotional spontaneity or artistic inevitability.

The air of depression that precipitated the poem would appear to have been far more suffocating than what the poet confronted while giving shape to the earlier poem. There has apparently been a further stiffening in the poet's posture. The movement, ironically enough, was not in the direction indicated by the affirmations of the poem. Yet it is likely that the poet's desire expressed here to attach himself to the spirit-world was sincere enough at the moment. But he was apparently handicapped in the effort by the pull of his innate instincts in the opposite direction. The vehemence and persistence with which he has sought to repudiate that pull through denigrating 'the fury and the mire of human veins' stanza after stanza perhaps betray his awareness of the futility of the effort. The flesh-and-blood-world appears to shadow him wherever he is. Thus, "the view of the initiate" (as John Unterecker calls it) fails to be essentially different from that of "the uninitiated.

outsider. As observed by T.R. Henn, the complexities appear to run through the fabric of the poem like a thread.

The attempt at resolving them made towards the end of the poem looks pitifully feeble in the face of the overwhelming influx of fleshly images:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

There is a touch of irony in the reference made to the attempt of the smithies to break a flood. The starlit or moonlit dome, the embittered moon, the flames, the dancer and other images of that sort seem to acquire significance only in the light of "A Vision". Attempts at reading esoteric or Neoplatonist significances into the poem are unlikely to enhance its validity as a work of art. The world of Rysantium is apparently free of all religious significance. God, who had a place in the earlier Rysantium has, curiously enough, vanished out of the new city.

If we are to take the absence of God here as an indication of the dominance of the conscious mind in the making of the poem, the validity of the visionary moment recorded

66. WBYCP., p.281.
therein is bound to be suspect. But the Romantic strain of the realistic perceptions of the poet we have noted earlier is likely to lend some credibility to the moment still. When George Bornstein regards "the summoning of images" as a Yeatsian mode of envisioning, he suggests an awareness of this fact.67

T.R. Hemn's view that the Yeatsian achievement here is more than the arrested beauty of the Keatsian Urn sounds far from convincing.68 May be, Yeats's poem is the embodiment of a long striving after mathematical perfection. But such an achievement in itself can hardly sustain its pretensions to superiority as a work of art. Keats's picture, in fact, reveals a cogency, vitality and compassion which the world of Byzantium sadly lacks.

We are not also convinced that the later poem on Byzantium is the better of the two. Its system of tensions is certainly more complex and its overtones more significant, as pointed out by Hemn.69 But its overloaded imagery imparts it an air of artificiality which is in sharp contrast to the impression of authenticity conveyed by the earlier poem. The genuine emotions of the poet are sought to be regulated - shall we say regimented? - rather arbitrarily. If the experience described is of a mystical order, the poet has taken a

68. The Lonely Tower, p.215.
bad risk in trying to communicate it. Indeed we are aware that the problem concerns all visionary Romantics. The poem, as a whole, has to be taken as an elaborate record of a visionary moment. The impression of artificiality in its expression may have to be blamed entirely on the conscious intellect.

A concerted bid on Yeats's part to evolve a unifying symbol to reconcile the flesh with the spirit, the living with the dead, the being with the becoming and time with eternity seems to have helped him to arrive at Byzantium. But while packing the images of the poem with multiple significances through a self-conscious effort, he fails to make them look less than artificial. The air of the city tends to be heavy and suffocating, as it were. The apparent lack of a meaningful relation among the images of the poem perhaps accounts for its lack of spontaneity and vitality. Of course, the absence of imagistic coherence and cogency in the poem is apt to disappear, if we are inclined to relate the imagery to the Yeatsian System. It seems easy enough to agree with Harold Bloom as he remarks that "Byzantium" must stand or fall with "A Vision". 70

All the same, we should not lose sight of the validity of the city envisioned here to Yeats himself. A part of his being, to be sure, craved for a life in Byzantium, as he

70. Yeats, p.393.
confessed in "A Vision". The thought of its being beyond his reach must have greatly depressed him.

And what the poet has sought to concretise in the poem is an awareness of great intensity, even if we are prone to take it for the vain longing of the fly caught in the marmalade to rise in the sky. Possibly, the city also symbolises for Yeats an Ireland of his dreams, as suggested by Heen.

Yeats's failure to find a unifying symbol in Byzantium, as also to achieve Unity of Being in the artistic efforts involving it, would seem hardly surprising. We have had hints of his true affinities much earlier. The trend appears to have been set irrevocably as early as 1927. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" written that year proclaims his partiality for the fleshly world in unambiguous terms:

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men;
Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
A folly that men sees
Or must suffer if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul
I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.71
Of course, this assertion formed part of a conflict that was still unresolved. Presumably, it was only around 1930 that the die was cast. His long vacillation, thus, comes to an end. The new alignment is indicated with an impressive flourish:

Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?
So get you gone, Von Hugo, though with blessings on your head.  

The concluding lines of his "Two Songs from a Play" added in the early 1930's may also bear testimony to it:

Whatever flames upon the night
Man's own resinous heart has fed.  

The earlier lines of the poem are said to have been written in 1926. Their imagery depends on the Symbolist mode of suggestion and perhaps suffered for want of a statement. The words which embodied that statement have a ring of sincerity about them. It is amusing to note that such an affirmation synchronized with a seeming triumph of the Yeatsian intellect in its quest for a spirit-world.

The laughing and singing referred to in the concluding part of the "Dialogue" grow hysterical thereafter, gaining extra depth and poignancy in a hostile environment. Apparentlly, the poet, in his old age, is forced to the conclusion that only a 'frenzy' could meet his ends in the conditions

72. Ibid., p.286.
73. Ibid., p.240.
that prevailed, as

Neither loose imagination
Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone,
Can make the truth known. 74

C.H. Sisson has observed that "'Sailing to Byzantium' is
the most consistent attempt on the part of Yeats to give
himself over to the intellect, as 'Words for Music Perhaps'
is his most consistent attempt to give himself over to the
body." 75 But it is doubtful whether Yeats really needed a
deliberate bid to give himself over to the body. What was
needed for the purpose was perhaps only a slackening of the
resolve that made him count on intellectually contrived solu-
tions in his earlier life. The "aesthetic escape-routes" 76
he tried had obviously failed to impress him.

F.R. Leavis's comments on the Byzantine poems do not
sound too harsh, though we may find him labouring under posi-
tivist obsessions elsewhere. He says:

"Sailing to Byzantium" doesn't come out of any whole-
ness of being or mastery of experience, its poetic
or quasi-musical satisfyingness as a totality is not
an index of any permanent stability achieved by the
poet in life...." 77.

What is implied by the Byzantine escapade is the loss of the
inner stability Yeats had earlier found in his life. It

74. Ibid., p.346.
76. Cowell, Raymond, W.B.Yeats (London: Even Brothers Ltd.,
77. Lectures in America, p.75.
obviously meant a desire, momentary thought to run away from
the complexities of life, abandoning all attempts to come to
grips with them.

Yeats probably meant to portray in the Byssantium poems
the life after death, as he conceived of it. But he has
actually done much more. Attempts at explaining them in
eschatological terms made by critics like F. A. C. Wilson are,
therefore, bound to yield distorted pictures.

When D. S. Savage observes that the development revealed
in Yeats's work was a "development in a vacuum," what he
hints at seems to be the absence of a unifying moral subject
in his poetry. Stephen Spender has drawn attention to it. Yeats
was, in fact, refreshingly free of all moral or religious
preoccupations. His concern was primarily aesthetic. Spender
has also referred to the lack of a philosophy in Yeats. One
wonders whether it really matters in Yeats, any more than it
does in Shakespeare. Yet a mature attitude towards life and
its problems is perhaps something we might bargain for
in him. If his tragic view of life, his attempts at self-
dramatization, the Romantic strain of his realism, and his
desperate decision to fall back on his emotions make severe
demands on the impression of maturity that he presents, his
exquisite sensibility and integrity may compensate for it all
in ample measure.

Cape Ltd., 1935), p. 130. Reprinted in The Permanence of
of Yeats, p. 169.
In his later life Yeats could probably draw assurance from the superficial similarity between his neglect of physical nature and the low opinion of the Neoplatonists about material life. And F.A.C. Wilson, for one, has emphasised the affinity between Yeats and the Neoplatonists. While one would certainly appreciate Wilson's well-meaning endeavour to attach Yeats to an accepted faith, one cannot easily imagine that Yeats could ever have surrendered himself to the Ultimate Reality, as the Neoplatonists did, more than momentarily. Moreover, they could not also have shared with Yeats the Blakean belief that eternity is in love with the productions of time. They would have found his obsession with "fish, flesh or fowl" rather nauseating. One who is so much in love with the wheel of becoming could hardly be expected to climb up the Neoplatonist ladder without a heavy heart.

Yeats's conception of the Unity of Being implied a desire to create in the work of art what he despaired of in life. He was soon to abandon his concern for it. The inner poise and equanimity needed for an achievement of that order were not, however, beyond Yeats. He could find them well before he slipped into the 'tragic phase' of his life. Apparently, they had nothing to do with the maturity that came with age. The poem that marked the zenith of the Yeatsian

achievement in this direction is perhaps "Among School-children". It was written in 1926. The tranquillity suggested by the poem seems to have been helped largely by the peace that prevailed on his home-front and the world-wide renown that he could gain on his being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. It was enhanced too by the first flush of the freedom Ireland had just won. He had also become a Senator in the Free Irish Republic.

As a distinguished senator, Yeats visits a convent school and jots down in his diary a topic for a poem "School children and the thought that life will waste them". He also wants to bring in the old thought that life prepared us for what never happens. We are reminded of the remark made by Margaret Rudd on how Yeats spent most of his life in perfection of a technique to express a vision that never came." In a letter to Olivia Shakespeare, Yeats calls the poem a curse upon old age. All that certainly looks unpromising material to make an impressive poem. Nevertheless, the product that came out of it bears testimony to a perfect coordination between the faculty of imagination and the inventive genius characteristic of Yeats. It is pleasant to see Yeats begin a poem in such a direct, lucid and unassuming manner. Even his smile looks natural and relaxed. He is obviously free of all tensions at the moment.

81. WBTS, pp.242-45.
82. Divided Image, p.197.
While watching the lovely forms of young children, the poet's thought flies to a distant past, when a person with a Ledaean body told him a tale. It is easy enough to identify the person alluded to. She was Yeats's Helen. According to the poet, they enjoyed each other's sympathy and confidence then. It was as though their two natures had formed one whole, just as the two hemispheres formed a sphere. Modifying one of Plato's parables he says that they were like the yolk and white of an egg. Plato's parable refers to the suggestion that man was originally double, with two faces, four hands and so on. On being divided into two halves, they strive towards each other in love.83

The picture of the relationship between Maud Gonne and Yeats looks slightly exaggerated. Possibly, the attempt at idealizing a hapless thing brought some consolation to the old man.

With the image of Maud Gonne in the back of his mind, Yeats looks at the children in front of him. He wonders whether Maud too had looked like one of them in her childhood. Even Helen-like beauties, he thinks may, after all, have something in common with the lesser ones. When Yeats tries to imagine whether Maud too had her hair and cheek as colourful, his heart grows wild with an ineffable feeling and the

The poem contains instances of the Yeatsian manner in which ideas drawn from Plato and Aristotle are put to use. It suggests no blind admiration. We have seen how Yeats modified one of Plato's parables for idealising his relationship with Maud Gonne. Later he refers to Plato's belief that the world we see is only a covering over the real structure of things. The notion must have pleased him as it seemingly justified his neglect of physical nature. But the affinity suggested could hardly be proof of a Neoplatonist leaning, as we have observed elsewhere. Aristotle is said to have whipped Alexander as he was the latter's tutor. And Pythagoras, whose biographer credited him with golden thighs, suggesting immense sexual potency perhaps, discovered the music of the spheres. But all of them were no better than scarecrows in their old age.

The mention of the golden thighs along with the music of the spheres and the reference to whipping by a philosopher may amuse us. But it seems part of Yeats's celebrated bid to achieve Unity of Being - ensuring a harmonious blending of thought, imagination and emotion.

The presence of nuns beside him seems to bring back the poet's thoughts to the present. Now, he thinks of the contrast between the kinds of images dear to nuns and mothers. Inanimate images do not disappoint a nun in the way they
disappoint a mother. The nun's love is of a different kind, but it also brings about a fusion of memory, emotion and imagination, as the other kinds of love. He brackets them all together: lover's passion, nun's piety and mother's affection. The images of bronze and marble, lifeless as they are, arouse emotions as well as the living images worshipped by lovers and mothers. The manner in which the poet addresses them is significant.

... O Presences
That passion, piety and affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise —
0 self-born mockers of men's enterprise.

The contrast implied does not seem to concern the different types of images valued by the nuns and the others. For the poet here seems to be in favour of assigning a high pedestal to the bronze and marble statuettes on a par with their counterparts, that arouse passion and affection. His concern seems to concentrate on the lifeless images made by enterprising men like himself. The reference might not be to poetic images alone. We are aware how Yeats struggled to construct a religion. The images that he invented for his own worship have obviously failed to deliver the goods. In such a context the traditional images worshipped by those who attached themselves to formal religions must have appeared to him more satisfying and life-like. Hence his craving for an inclusive artistic image on the one hand and for a consoling religious one on the other.

84. WBYAN, p.244.
The poem now moves on to its vital conclusion. It presents a moment of heightened awareness. He says that neither body nor spirit is complete in itself. In his view, it is therefore wrong to injure the body for the well-being of the spirit. Both physical beauty and spiritual wisdom have to grow together. The thought appears to have evoked an intensity in the poet. It brings a glorious image before his mind's eye:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can I know the dancer from the dance? 85

The Dancer, as noted by Frank Kermode, is one of Yeats's great reconciling images, containing life in death, death in life, movement and stillness, action and contemplation, body and soul. 86 Kermode has observed that the tree, too, provides a traditional analogy in support of the Image's independent life. The way in which these two emblems have been fused into a splendid image is indeed admirable.

The depressing thoughts and emotions expressed in the poem have not resulted in a distressing conclusion. Despair gets indistinguishably dissolved, as it were, in the instinctive joy of life symbolised by the Dancer and the chestnut tree. It is a triumph of the Romantic imagination.

85. Ibid., p.245.
86. Romantic Image, p.48.
John Unterecker has pointed out that the poem is organized around a series of parallel trinities. What is more deliberately planned is perhaps a faithful-looking recording of thoughts and feelings and the drawing of a consoling conclusion by means of a conciliatory image. No doubt, the conclusion has the air of a dramatic revelation owing largely to the visionary moment recorded in it. The imagery, however, has a look of inevitability about it.

Thomas Whitaker's view that the speaker here (as also in "Sailing to Byzantium") is a new species of man who is Yeats's contrary implies that the ecstatic mood of the concluding lines of the poem is beyond the reach of Yeats. To suggest that Yeats was not capable of a momentary ecstasy that makes a dismal life bearable, is to deny him his legitimate pretensions to Romanticism. In the case of "Sailing to Byzantium" we may have to concede that the speaker was, in a sense, the poet's contrary, as the pursuit of spirituality suggested by the poem ran counter to his innate inclinations.

George Bornstein has noted how the poem typifies the genre of romantic poetry defined as the poetry of experience, as it presents not just the Romantic Image but the poet's struggle to create it. It may also be a splendid instance of the Wordsworthian self-confrontation attempted by Yeats.

89. Bornstein, George, TR, pp. 24-25.
The poem perhaps gives scope for a solipsistic inference that heavenly glory is a product of human intellect and imagination and it is the mind that makes both hell and heaven. Such a perspective naturally brings him close to the Coleridgean view of man and nature expressed in his "Dejection". The Coleridgean theory of Romanticism - called a 'monistic transcendentalism' - was evidently after Yeats's heart as hinted at by G.S. Fraser. When Northrop Frye says that Romanticism, on Yeats's theory, would arise as a mask or counter vision, an imaginative protest against the industrial revolution, and end by being a form in which the culture of the industrial revolution expresses itself, he seems to refer to the cause and effect of the transcendental vision.

Symbolist poetry had, in fact, embodied the protest against the industrial revolution much earlier. But thanks to the anti-intentionalist stance of the Symbolists, their poetry tended to enforce a divorce between life and art. The Yeatsian contribution was primarily in bringing it back to earth. Denis Donoghue, however, tends to dispute his claims to Symbolism on that score, when he says:

Yeats was not after all a thorough-going Symbolist. Even in the elegy on Robert Gregory he allowed his system to be bewildered, brought to silence by brute fact, by "the abrupt indiscretion of events", as Symons said.... Yeats's sense of fact and his sense


of justice admit the rival terminology, however rude. The admission undermines his security as Symbolist, but it gives with one hand what it took away with the other; it allows him, by entertaining conflict, to find a more inclusive and a greater art. In his mature poems Yeats does not allow his sense of life to be overwhelmed by the charm of a system, even one of his own devising; he became a major poet when he determined to live by that creed.92

If Yeats could grow into a major poet by attaching himself to life, we may safely assert that Symbolism itself matured into a major force because of his influence. And in-so-far as the Symbolist symbol was regarded as "a self-sufficient vehicle pointing to an unnamed tenor",93 there was need for "intellectual armature"94 to make such symbols intelligible. Yeats, for one, tried to tackle the problem in his own way. John Bayley has shown us how Yeats made use of "conversational armature" between self-contained symbols in poems like "Sailing to Byzantium",95 "Leda and the Swan"96 and "The Second Coming"97 may also exemplify a manner in which he came to grips with the problem. The merging of the two distinctive genres of Romantic poetry, identified as the Symbolist poetry and the

95. WBYP., pp.217–218.
96. Ibid., p.241.
97. Ibid., pp.210–211.
poetry of experience, achieved by Yeats implied a masterly
bid to tackle the same problem. While the Symbolist method
derived largely from William Blake and S.T. Coleridge has
found favour with Frank Kermode (who was rather disenchanted
with Symbolism as an exclusive poetic creed) and the New
Critics (who, amusingly enough, showed little awareness of
their Romantic legacy), the poetry of experience favoured by
Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats has found wider acceptance in
our times, owing largely to its clarity and allegiance to
experience. Indeed the difference between the two genres has
often been a matter of emphasis. While excessive insistence
on nonpropositional imagery was the bane of the Symbolist
mode, the poetry of experience, in its Wordsworthian lucidity
and emphasis on the mental action leading to the moment of
epiphany, ran the risk of getting diluted into plain, prosaic
statement.

Denis Donoghue has observed how Ezra Pound, an admirer
of Yeats as he was, rebuked Yeats for his excessive leaning
towards Symbolism.\textsuperscript{98} Pound insisted that "the given world,
such as it is to common imagination, was more durable than
the bronzes of Symbolism." The later poetry of Yeats yields
conclusive evidence of the manner in which he responded to
the advice of this younger friend. It may well be a measure
of the Yeatsian humility, though critics have often tended to
lose sight of it.

\textsuperscript{98} vide Donoghue on Yeats, pp.80-81.
The Symbolist movement in the direction of an autonomous art severed from life and experience had, in fact, amounted to a deviation from the ways of the great Romantics from whom the Symbolists had inherited their technique. The Yeatsian endeavour was largely to correct that deviation. Yeats's indifferent attitude towards nature, and his weak grasp of realities, which we have mentioned earlier, might have come in the way of his effort in that regard. While he could see the world as "a symbolic dramatisation of eternity", he showed no interest in physical nature on that score. The sense of otherness that he felt shut out a splendid treasure-house of symbols from him. Yet, his archetypal images and the 'self-begotten' ones of his later poetry brought a good amount of respectability to his Symbolist poetry. We have already seen how it was initially helped by the fresh and lively symbols drawn from the Irish Mythology and legend. The concreteness and precision consciously promoted by the later Yeats also meant a signal service to Symbolism.

The impression of concreteness in the later poetry of Yeats resulted partly from its stark diction. It is, in fact, reckoned as an aspect of modernity. The manner favoured by the later Yeats was indeed classical. But his adoption of such a new garb constituted an attempt to bring Romantic poetry abreast of the times. It has helped a good deal in the revival of the Romantic tradition in the modern context.

99. Pinto, p. 106.
The later Yeats was so much entangled in the revelations recorded in "A Vision" that he found it nearly impossible to keep them out of his poetry. And they naturally brought much obscurity to some of his poems. But in his best poetry he was able to keep his pet theories well under control. "Leda and the Swan", and "The Second Coming" may serve as instances. "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" is a poem marred by the intrusion of his theories. "Among Schoolchildren", as we have seen, is refreshingly free of its influence. The seeming lack of coherence and cogency in the imagery of "Eysentium" seems to spring largely from its relationship to "A Vision".

Its failure is perhaps the failure of the pure symbolist method shorn of all statement. Yeats's decision to confine himself to the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" in his last phase involved the abandonment of his "Visionary" obsessions for good.

"Leda and the Swan" has perhaps been the most celebrated sonnet of our century. Its appeal has indeed been universal. Yeats himself, we are told, was proud of it.

Having meant to make it a political poem, Yeats has told us how the bird and lady took "such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it".

The poem seeks to present a moment that resulted in the birth of the Greek civilisation. A more dramatic opening for a poem can seldom be thought of:

100. WBYUP, p.241.
A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

A daasing image is thus presented. An attempt at expounding its symbolic significance through the insertion of a prosaic statement in the poem was bound to dilute the efficacy of the symbol. The questions that follow presumably represent a Yeatsian bid to get over that problem rhetorically:

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

The lines make his meaning explicit. The poet, then, seeks to tighten up the poem soon enough, through reverting to the Symbolist method:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

The lines constitute the visionary moment of the poem, along with the lines of the opening section. The rhetorical question that follows marks the end of the vision:

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

The enlargement of the 'subject' here is apparently aimed at throwing light on the symbol. The questions reveal that the intellectual faculty of the poet had not been wholly submerged in the flood of emotions aroused by the portrait. The impact of the bird and the lady on Yeats may be identified with the
influence of the visionary moment on the Romantic poet. It was only momentary. The poet has thus succeeded in mingling blood, imagination and intellect in his poetic effort. The questions resorted to may also suggest a wholesome awareness of the need of curbing the Symbolist tendency (shared by the Imagists) to smoke out discursive element from poetry at the cost of obscurity. They may also be proof of a Keatsian scepticism that helped Yeats to hold his visionary inclinations in leash.

A picture from Michaelangelo is said to have inspired Yeats to write the poem. But then, he has not been faithful to it. Critics like T.R.Hemm and John Unterecker have tried to search out the other sources that might have prompted Yeats to alter the details of the portrait. It seems odd that they should expect Yeats to care for minute details, while the bird and the lady took possession of the scene - including perhaps the poet's own inner landscape. Even otherwise, Yeats lacked patience for such details. He was very much an impressionist and cared mainly for the impact. The tendency, in its aggravated form, perhaps accounts, partly at least, for the unnatural appearance of the natural landscapes of his later poetry. What we have in "Leda and the Swan" is an imaginative reproduction of the picture from Michaelangelo.

A distinguished friend of Yeats's, George Russell (known as 'A.E.') is said to have refused to publish the poem, as he
felt that it would not be understood. A.G. Stock says that the real obstacle was that it could not be misunderstood. 101

To be fair to Yeats, we have to observe that the difficulty with the poem is of seeing it in perspective, without being carried away in the violent sweep of the orgasmic moment portrayed in it.

Harold Bloom desires the reader to ask himself: "What is there of value in the poem?" 102 Presumably, the critic believes that it has nothing valuable about it. The irreligious tendencies suggested by the poem seem to have irked him. But are we to expect a salutary lesson consistent with accepted moral codes, from every work of art? Are we to attach no value at all to the sheer excellence of workmanship? Can it be that aesthetic pleasure means nothing to the critic? It is true that the poem presents only a single moment, as pinpointed by Bloom. But what is done is done with incredible skill and dramatic force. Bloom, surely, is not unaware of it. But then, he says that clarity and fulness are sacrificed for the sake of dramatic shock. We cannot possibly believe that Bloom would really have liked the moment portrayed here to be more elaborately detailed and 'full'.

We must, however, concede that the pleasure afforded by the poem is not of the highest kind and could not possibly

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102. Yeats, p.365.
secure the poet's claims to greatness. For, a very good poet, as T.S. Eliot puts it, has something to give us besides pleasure. "Leda and the Swan" may well be the nearest equivalent to "pure" poetry that the modern world is capable of.

Harold Bloom has also expressed a wish that the sonnet had a touch of the Shelleyan scepticism about divine power and knowledge. 103 As we know, Yeats was sceptical about things almost to a fault. We are aware how he failed to give complete credence to his own vaunted System. His inability to attach himself to a traditional religion may also have to be traced to the same predicament. To suggest that such a man trusted the Greek Legends completely may be scandalous, to say the least. Ivor Winters also seems to labour under an identical misconception, when he questions the authenticity of the legend used here. 104 It is incredible that these learned men should have so much difficulty in appreciating the positive aspects of the Yeatsian achievement here. It is odd too that they should pick up such a flimsy stick to hit him with, after so much has been said of the relationship between poetry and belief in our century.

Another poem noted for its distracting imagery is "The Second Coming". 105 It is known for its prophetic significance too.

103. Ibid., pp. 364-65.
105. WBYOP, pp. 210-11.
While "Leda and the Swan" deals with the starting of a cycle, "The Second Coming" envisions the genesis of the next one, marking the end of the Christian era.

The birth of the antithetical spirit represented by the Sphinx is the subject of "The Second Coming". The images of the poem are drawn from what Yeats calls Spiritus Mundi, which is virtually a storehouse of archetypal images.

The existing state of the world is picturesquely portrayed in the opening lines of the poem. The falconer is said to have lost control over the falcon. Critics, by and large, have been identifying the falconer with Jesus Christ. Harold Bloom, however, sounds a note of discord when he takes the falconer for man and the falcon for nature. He certainly reveals much ingenuity in arguing that the falconer's control of the falcon could symbolise man's mastery over nature. But it is not clear how the momentous achievements of science witnessed in our times could be deemed as proof of man's loss of hold over nature.

A state of anarchy is said to prevail everywhere, the blood-dimmed tide having drowned the ceremony of innocence. "The ceremony of innocence" has deep significance in the Yeatsian terminology. The poet associated it with the horn of plenty and the laurel tree that symbolized peace and harmony.

They are, in fact, the two major symbols in his poem "A Prayer for my daughter". In Yeats's view, the absence of ceremony resulted in the flood of hatred and arrogance that we witness in the present-day-society. For him the drowning of the ceremony of innocence coincided with the rising of the middle-class Philistinism. His statement that

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity

may not, however, amount to an attempt at identifying the best with the members of aristocracy. May be, he subscribed to a feeling that his own sceptical leanings suggested a superior mind. If his tone here sounds rather too assertive to suggest a sceptical bent of mind, his mood of frenzy may have to be blamed for it.

In that mood Yeats is sure of the possibility of a revelation that ends the present plight of the world. He calls it the Second Coming, allowing the poem a Christian denotation. Even as he prophesies the Second Coming, the vast image of a rough beast is said to have troubled his sight. It is a macabre thing, in its outward features:

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gasp blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Real shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The appearance of the beast marks the visionary moment of the poem. The beast keeps moving in a clumsy manner. Its look
is blank and pitiless. The "reeling shadows of the indignant desert-birds" enhance our sense of horror. They seem to represent nature's fury.

The vision comes to an abrupt end. Then, curiously enough, the poet himself explains its significance, in a seeming bid to make up for the inadequacy of the Symbolist method. He says that it will bring to an end the twenty centuries of stony sleep. The air of certainty in the statement is the contribution of the Yeatsian System. The end of the stony sleep is expected to stem the blood-dimmed tide let loose on the world.

Does the poet feel a certain relish, as he mentions 'the blood-dimmed tide'? Louis MacNeice, for one, believes that he does. 107 He ascribes it to Yeats's fascist tendencies. Graham Hough also inclines towards such a view. 108 To George Bornstein, however, the phrase 'rough beast' suggests horror rather than delight. He does not believe that the speaker rejoices. 109 Denis Donoghue also thinks on the same lines. 110 It is certainly possible that the speaker is both horrified and delighted at the same time. While the sense of delight may well be attributed to his fascist trends, his feeling

108. The Last Romantics, p.249.
110. Donoghue on Yeats, p.
nature may account for the sense of horror. Louis MacNeice has suggested that the poet felt happy about the prospect of the worst assuming powers. We have no reason to believe that the passionate intensity of the worst had great fascination for him. If it had, he would not probably have envisioned the Second Coming.

Significantly, the poet has not chosen to stick to the mood of frenzy. He sounds fully alive to the gravity of the situation. A conscious bid to exercise a cerebral control over it is apparent. That is why the darkness is allowed to drop again, bringing about the pattern of the greater Romantic lyric.

Yeats, here, appears to have held in check his tendency to assume tragic gaiety in difficult situations. A sober awareness of the disquieting implications of his prophecy may partly account for that restraint. The sceptical cast of his mind would, no doubt, have saved him from giving full credence to it, as remarked by Frank Kermode.

Yeats's nature was delicate and sensitive. Yet it was complex and nearly intractable. Apparently it longed after a prop of some sort or other to keep its poise. His intense hatred of scientific rationalism and objectivity coupled with his inability to seek solace in a conventional religion must

111. MacNeice, Louis, p.120.
have rendered the problem extremely acute for him. He was thus left struggling to construct a religion on his own. He was prone to believe in the mystery of the world. As observed by John Unterecker, he felt that there was incontrovertible evidence everywhere of an invisible, but eminently active, spirit-world. David Holbrook says:

It is possible to be "religious" without having a specific belief. That is, it is possible to allow the mystery of the world...to share a degree of the "spiritual dimension" with those who have faith.

In such a broad sense, Yeats may be found to be religious. His comment on T.S. Eliot in his introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse suggests an intimate understanding of the ethos of a religious person. He says:

(Eliot's) religion, compared to that of John Gray, Francis Thomson, Lionel Johnson in "The Dark Angel" lacks all strong emotion; a New England Protestant by descent, there is little self-surrender in his personal relation to God and the soul....

Presumably it was a comparable inability on the part of Yeats to surrender himself entirely to God that prompted him to keep a safe distance from all formal religions. And probably he was amused to find a similar inability in one who chose a path that was different from his. We may assume that it was

114. Yeats, W.B., OMY, Introduction, p.XXII.
the element of scepticism that promoted such an inability in
these poets. Eliot, however, seems to have managed to sus-
pend his disbelief to the extent of being able to believe
in a formal religion in order to "set my lands in order." Yeats might well have considered such a move dishonest.
Apparently, he hated to wear a mask in matters concerning
religion. His effort to remake himself did not affect his
attitude towards established religions. He had to count on
his own inner resources for creating joy and self-assurance.
Indeed his attempts in this regard may appear rather ridicu-
losous to those who look up to conventional religions for meeting
such needs. Yet, we cannot help admiring the honesty of his
intentions. Even the challenges of his old age did not make
him turn to dishonest solutions. An absolute faith of the
conventional type perhaps demanded a certain simplicity of
mind. It was beyond Yeats. His failure to thrash out an
intellectual solution to his problems made him fall back on
his emotions. He concludes that

... being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart...116

And he tended to believe that "Eternity is passion." Indeed
the belief smacks of an attempt to make a virtue of necessity.
Yet he imagines himself as "a passion-driven exultant man".


116. WBYUP, p.391.
He began to sing out "sentences he has never thought". The subordination of the thought-content to the emotions of the heart was not a matter of regret for Yeats, if we are to judge him by the tone of his assertions. It was perhaps a fitting finale to the life of a "supreme poet" of passions that he was. In the Wordsworthian terminology we may say that the poems of the phase embodied a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings in spite of the masks assumed.

Yeats's equation of passion with eternity may lend a new dimension to these poems. In fact, Edith Sitwell has gone to the extent of describing the "Words for Music" as "undoubtedly the greatest lyrics of the last hundred years, because of their intense fusion of spirit and matter, because of their overwhelming fire and their strange world-old wisdom". Elisabeth Drew observes that the Crazy Jane poems have combined "universal, mystical wisdom with racy sensual and primitive elements".

Passions, vulgar and sublime, assumed and authentic, found adequate expression in Yeats's poems. His vast and varied experience as a lover must have helped him to present the theme of sexual love in all its complexity.

117. Ibid., p. 332.
To those who miss the spiritual aspect of the poems of Yeats's last phase, they may appear to be overly emotional stuff. T.S. Eliot, for one, could not possibly have acknowledged their spiritual import. He has made no secret of his disenchantment with the Yeatsian ideas of the supernatural. He believed that Yeats's supernatural world was of the wrong kind. Yet he valued the last poems of Yeats for the forthright and uninhibited quality of the emotions expressed in them. They made him revise his idea of impersonality and even recent his opinion on Yeats. He was convinced that the impersonality found in the later Yeats was deeper and more substantial, compared with what could be contrived by a skilful craftsman. He had to concede that it was the latter sort that he had advocated in his early criticism. His later poetry testifies to his change of heart in this regard. J.B. Bear has observed how Keats maintained that a poet should seek for a knowledge which is at the same time universal and spontaneous within his own mind. The Odes are found to enshrine Keats's success in the search. The Yeatsian achievement acknowledged by Eliot may be an identical one. When Vivienne Koch remarks that in Yeats's last poems the man who suffered and the man who wrote were, in the most creative sense of suffering, one, she is only reiterating what Eliot made explicit years ago.

Finding such an inclusive voice that was both personal and universal does not, however, amount to the achievement of Unity of Being. The emotional side of the Yeatsian personality which found abundant expression in the last phase of his life is obviously only a part of the whole. The Unity of Being implied an inclusive view embracing all aspects of the human personality for giving them harmonious expression. It had to be an intellectual, imaginative and emotional effort at the same time.

It is amusing to note how Yeats managed to suspend his disbelief — his sceptical bent of mind — to the extent of being able to believe in the adequacy of emotions in the context, even as Eliot opted for a faith of a higher order to grapple with his problems. The Yeatsian belief in the blood — in the basic instincts of man — evidenced here has a Laurencian tint. But while Lawrence held fast to such a belief throughout his life without allowing the meddling intellect to dilute it, the Yeatsian intellect made its presence felt in his invention of masks. In fact, it also tried to assert itself over his emotions as instanced by the Rhapsody poems. The Keatsian faith in the truth of emotions had not allowed him to surrender himself to them more than momentarily. While Yeats revealed an affinity with Keats in his sceptical tendencies, the concluding phase seems to have brought him closer to the Laurencian mode of thinking "with the blood".
His tendency to identify the sensual with the mystical was also Lawrencean. His sceptical approach, however, would seem to have saved him from the Lawrencean lack of humour. It may, however, be fallacious to assume that Yeats modelled himself on Lawrence. His reliance on passions must have been inspired largely by the Blakean belief in their holiness and in their adequacy as a means to eternity, as noted by Elizabeth Drew. Yeats's achievement in his last phase included the narrowing of the gap between the lyrical and the dramatic— the personal and impersonal—in art. The poet's much-lamented decision to hand himself over to Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman helped in that effort. It was, in fact, anticipated by the unsavailing attempt of his earlier phase to escape from the complexity of the flesh-and-blood-world into a world of art. The invasion of his inner scene by emotions was the inevitable consequence of the inability of his intellect to assert itself.

The means resorted to by Yeats for filling the void created by his want of faith in a formal religion should not have made a matter for ridiculing him. Critics like D.S. Savage, however, have shown no inclination to appreciate the magnitude of the problem confronted by him. The hollowness at the centre of his work mentioned by Savage in a seeming bid to disparage him, perhaps alludes to that void. Paul

125. Poetry, p.118.
Tillich has presented the facts concerning the typically modern maledy suggested by that void:

The decisive event which underlies the search for meaning and the despair of it in the twentieth century is the loss of God in the nineteenth century . . . . This is felt both as a loss and as a liberation. It drives one either to nihilism or to the courage which takes non-being into itself . . . . On this basis Existentialism, that is, the great art, literature, and philosophy of the twentieth century, reveals the courage to face things as they are and to express the anxiety of meaninglessness. 127

Yeats, for one, has revealed that "courage to face things as they are and to express the anxiety of meaninglessness." What B.L. Reid takes for spiritual arrogance in Yeats may well be reckoned courage. He observes how, in Yeats's world, "man stands naked before tragic fact, his destiny being his own to make." While Reid has given due credit to Yeats for his absolute integrity by calling him "that uncommon thing, a completely honest poet", 128 he does not seem to realise that an honesty of such a class should naturally involve the courage of conviction.

Yeats's case was in a sense rather peculiar, as he developed his hostility towards science after allowing it to nullify his faith. His sceptical cast of mind must have affected his attitude to science, too. He was thus saved from

128. The Lyric of Tragedy, p.
the modern "obsession with the mechanical truths of empirical science". As observed by Anne Smith, this obsession has led poets into the blind alley of nihilism and away from "the realities of art which help to lift life out of its mediocrity". The notion that nihilism is a possible romantic consequence which modern poets must work through en route to a new poetry of reality, neglects the extent to which that working through is the chief ingredient in romanticism itself, as pointed out by George Bornstein.

Thanks to its capacity to look beyond the material aspects of the objects of nature, the Romantic imagination has helped to promote faith in the mystery of the world. Thus, it has been able to provide a viable substitute for religious faith that helps fill the void caused by the loss of God referred to by Paul Tillich. David Holbrook has noted that nihilism and cultural sensationalism often result from a failure of confidence in the powers of mind.

Yeats, with a creative imagination backed up by an amazing inventive skill revealed in his attitudinizing and wearing of masks, was able to hold out against all sorts of challenges.

The hysterical quality revealed in the concluding phase

129. vide, Lost Bearings, Editorial Note by Anne Smith.
132. Lost Bearings. It is the crux of David Holbrook's argument in the book.
of Yeats's life might be taken for a failure of his imagination. But the failure involved was presumably of his nerves. It results in the slackening of his resolve to pursue Unity of Being. The failure does not affect his inventive genius either, if his persistent wearing of masks even in his 'tragic phase' is any indication. P.R. Lewis rightly calls it the abandonment of all concern for the resolution, or paradoxically creative management of the complexity of life. 133

Donald Davie has said that poetry to be great "must reek of the human, as Wordsworth's poetry does". 134 Judged by that criterion, Yeats's claims to greatness is beyond dispute. But the visionary intensity evidenced in his poetry may be equally relevant. It is a Romantic legacy that he inherited through a heroic effort. In its absence his poetry might have had nothing but "passive suffering" for its theme. The Yeatsian contribution to the Romantic tradition seems to lie in the manner in which he endowed his visionary efforts with an aspect of heroism, and used it for salving, if not healing, the sores of life.

133. Lectures in America, p.75.
134. Davie, Donald, AR., p.165.